Obamacare, the News Media, and the Politics of 21st-Century Presidential Communication

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Studies of presidential framing and the media lead to contrary expectations of whether the president would be able to reframe a pejorative name for a major legislative achievement and alter its news coverage. The case of President Obama and the use of the term "Obamacare" to refer to the Affordable Care Act requires rethinking what we know about presidential communication strategies and contemporary news norms. Obama's embrace of the Obamacare moniker spread among supporters and led to its appearance with more positive/neutral depictions of the policy in the media. The term also has become more prominent in the news over time, raising questions about loosening standards of news objectivity and the future of this contested term.

Keywords: presidency, news media, Affordable Care Act, Obamacare, presidential communication

U.S. presidents face formidable challenges in attempting to frame policies and shape political debates, particularly in the 21st-century media environment. Given that presidential attempts to positively frame their positions for the media and the public require substantial time and effort with no guarantee of success, working to co-opt and reframe the established language of the president's opponents is an even more daunting project. Yet this is precisely the endeavor President Barack Obama and his surrogates embarked on in late March 2012, when they embraced the term "Obamacare" and sought to use it in service of promoting and defending the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010.

The Affordable Care Act (ACA) is perhaps the signature legislative achievement of the Obama administration, yet it is a policy with low levels of support and little understood by most Americans. Scholars have demonstrated a strong relationship between the public's evaluations of health care reform and Obama's job performance, frequently operating to the president's detriment (Jacobson, 2011). In addition to numerous congressional votes to repeal the ACA, a conflict over defunding and delaying its

provisions resulted in a federal government shutdown on October 1, 2013. Given these challenges, could the president frame Obamacare as compassionately securing Americans' right to health care and shift its associations away from a dangerous government takeover? The case is a test of how effectively U.S. presidents can shape interpretations of issues in public debates and is of central importance for the long-term legacy and legitimacy of this president and this particular policy.

Although Obamacare has become ubiquitous in U.S. public discourse, we have no systematic examination of how or why this occurred. This study explores how the president, his surrogates and supporters, and the news media have contributed to increased usage of the term and identifies changes in how it is presented in media coverage. I find the Obama team promoted a more favorable framing of Obamacare via digital channels, encouraging supporters to do the same. Subsequently, news coverage in mainstream outlets, reaching a larger and more diverse audience than the president's base, tilted in a somewhat more positive direction for health care reform where Obamacare was mentioned. Given the preponderance of negative news coverage featuring Obamacare, this minimal impact might still be important and speak to the need for a more sustained effort to reframe the term. This case thus contributes to existing research by demonstrating how presidential communication via the Web can affect the content of legacy media coverage, sometimes in unpredictable ways, revealing the contemporary fragmented media environment to be not as inhospitable to presidential influence as commonly assumed.

Presidential Framing and the News Media in 21st-Century Policy Debates

The modern presidential office is centered on public leadership, employing vast resources to favorably communicate the president's views to the American people (Jacobs & Shapiro, 2000; Kumar, 2007; Lowi, 1985; Neustadt, 1990; Tulis, 1987). Presidents therefore engage in framing efforts to situate issues within particular narratives that engender greater support for their political goals, and then aim to have such interpretations appear in the media to reach the wider public. Framing defines situations and sets the terms of debate, making some aspects of our reality more noticeable than others (Entman, 2003, 2004; Kuypers, 2009; Kuypers & D'Angelo, 2010; Reese, Gandy, & Grant, 2001). Zarefsky's (2005) study of the discourse surrounding the "war on poverty" identifies presidential power to influence how people think about a policy problem and its ideal resolution, noting, "Definition is the president's greatest asset . . . to name an object or idea is to influence attitudes about it" (p. 8).

Yet presidents rarely frame issues absent interference from opponents. Efforts to frame high-stakes issues for the public can produce competition among elites or "framing contests," as each side struggles to effectively interpret events for the press and the public (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 2004; Jamieson & Waldman, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 1997). Schaffner and Atkinson (2010) found that in the debate on the inheritance tax in the United States, the Republican-backed "death tax" frame (vs. the Democratic-preferred "estate tax") caused survey respondents to believe the policy applied more widely than it actually did, thus increasing expressed opposition. Jacobs and Shapiro (2000) demonstrate that opponents of Bill Clinton's health care reform effort were successful at framing the policy as destructive "big government" and "socialism" (p. 137), critiques also implied by the Obamacare moniker.

Having seemingly lost the battle over what the ACA would commonly be called, the Obama team's framing rhetoric highlighted the potentially positive connotations of the term Obamacare, emphasizing "care" and that the president himself "cares" about Americans' well-being. Some have identified presidential effectiveness at such "frame shifting" (Zarefsky, 2004, p. 613) or promoting a new frame of reference contrasting with how a subject was previously perceived. Green (1987) recounts Franklin Delano Roosevelt's transformation of the meaning of "liberal" and labeling of his foreign policy opponents "isolationists," contested terms that scholars have nevertheless subsequently adopted. Stuckey (2008) recounts that after Jimmy Carter established wide support for "human rights," the ambiguity of the phrase allowed later presidents to imbue it with their own set of meanings in service of their political goals, sometimes far removed from what Carter intended. Holian (2004) recounts how Clinton successfully focused the media's attention on his preferred framing of crime policy, stressing prevention over punishment, helping him "steal" the traditionally Republican-owned issue. Presidents are not the only figures so motivated—the clear connection between language, framing, and power has led some members of oppressed groups toward linguistic reclamation projects, using and thus redefining sexist, racist, or heteronormative slurs (Godrej, 2011).

At the same time, others argue that language activates frames that shape the brain's perception of events, and thus new language is needed for new frames, or "thinking differently requires speaking differently" (Lakoff, 2004, p. xv). While Sides (2006) finds politicians often "trespass" on opposition-owned issues by framing them differently and more favorably to themselves, Hänggli and Kriesi (2010) demonstrate that political actors have an easier time getting the frames they own into the news. Although the Obama administration would have an incentive to challenge the framing of Obamacare, it is unclear how wise it was to adopt opponents' rhetoric and whether media coverage would treat its alternative narrative favorably.

The literature presents a mixed picture on whether the president can obtain supportive coverage for his frames in the news. Journalists rely heavily on official sources like the president, even as technological advancements have given reporters greater potential freedom to interpret events (Livingston & Bennett, 2003). Major (2014) finds the media privilege the president's framing of unilateral executive powers, thereby contributing to the growth of unilateral authority. Entman's (2004) cascading activation model charts how framings of foreign policy issues can flow from the White House to the news media and ultimately to the public. Yet these cases also indicate why we might expect Obama to fall short: Because initial frames are lasting and frames congruent with cultural norms transmitted most easily, the president problematically sought to dislodge widely held negative impressions of Obamacare. In contrast to foreign policy, where the president faces fewer challenges to his authority, here we consider a domestic policy that encountered tremendous resistance. Further, there is even a lack of scholarly consensus on the president's ability to shape news coverage of the same issue over the same time period: Witness Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston's (2007) argument that the news media uncritically echoed the Bush administration's central frames in the "war on terror" alongside Kuypers, Cooper, and Althouse's (2012) contention that the press failed to accurately convey the president's post-9/11 frames to the public, instead overtly challenging them.

Concurrently, a substantial body of work questions the ability of the president to frame issues for the media. Following Watergate and the Vietnam War, many argue that media outlets took up a hyper-adversarial relationship with political figures, confrontationally challenging their messages as a matter of everyday journalistic practice (Jamieson & Waldman, 2004; Patterson, 1993, 2003). Boydstun (2013) finds that the explosive, skewed nature of agenda setting in the media makes it unlikely any political actor can sustain influence over news. The modernization of the mass media, evident in the advent of cable television and the Internet, has also dramatically altered the president's prospects for interpreting issues for the press. These innovative formats prominently feature analysis by partisan commentators with an incentive to echo or undermine politicians' versions of events (Belt, Just, & Crigler, 2012; Feldman, Maibach, Roser-Renouf, & Leiserowitz, 2012; Iyengar, 2011; Jamieson & Cappella, 2010; Levendusky, 2013). Cohen (2008) suggests this fragmented media environment offers less coverage of presidents and smaller audiences for presidential communications than was the case decades ago. Despite this daunting setting, the president still has significant incentives to pursue framing strategies. Lee (2014) argues that, although a direct relationship between the president and the public is weak, the news media significantly influence the public, raising the stakes for the administration's ability to have its frames favorably conveyed in news coverage.

One way the presidency has adapted to the challenges of the contemporary media moment is by using new media to avoid the scrutiny and commentary of journalists (Laurence, 2003; Owen & Davis, 2008; Stuckey, 2010). Rottinghaus (2010) argues that, because the media filter messages in a way that obstructs the president's ability to lead the public, the administration is better served by trying to reach citizens directly. The Obama administration often prefers to position the president's message within the "cloud" of information and ideas on the Internet (Heith, 2012). The 2008 and 2012 Obama campaigns used new media strategies to personalize campaign appeals (Bimber, 2014), dedicated an unprecedented amount of resources to digital campaigning (Hendricks, 2014), and used social media far more extensively than opponents (Pew Research Center, 2012).

Yet these tactics have clear limitations: Edwards (2012) concludes the White House e-mailing supporters is "preaching to the converted" (p. 677) and can only take a president so far. Heith (2013) argues that today's challenging media environment forces the president into a traveling "road show" to communicate with friendly audiences, a strategy that might secure positive local media coverage but does not move national approval ratings. Given the constraints of communicating directly with supporters, we need to explore the wider implications of the president's digital communications strategies: In short, what else might he get out of it?

I argue that Web-based communications not only allow the president to bypass the legacy press to frame issues for his base but can affect traditional media coverage, albeit in some ways likely unexpected by the president's team. When presidents and their surrogates e-mail, tweet, or post on their websites, the messages may be addressed to supporters, but the content is in the public domain. Yet little has been said about the impact of such presidential communications on coverage provided by traditional news outlets, whose coverage affects how the broader public thinks about politics (McCombs, 2014). As Web-based and social media communications become more widespread, this is a crucial element to study.

Thinking about how "new" media influences "old" media in this new communications context requires an understanding of how citizens and presidential surrogates now participate directly in popularizing framing rhetoric. Stuckey (2010) contends that today we all produce and alter presidential messages, democratizing presidential communication. This trend has led Herbst (2007) to declare that presidential speech is "dying, and possibly even dead" when the media obfuscate the president's messages and surrogates and citizens alike rewrite and transform presidential texts. Rather than a death, we might instead identify this as an evolution, as presidential communication successfully adapts to the innovative ways we now transmit and share information. I argue that presidential preaching to the choir via the Internet might afford the president opportunities to reach the "unconverted" masses with his frames, creating new possibilities for public leadership through strategies tailored to this distinctive media environment. The Obamacare case reflects a 21st-century style of presidential communication comparable to what Jenkins, Ford, and Green (2013) identify (largely in the private sector) as "spreadable" marketing—the administration constructs its messages to be spread by the president's staff, sympathetic pundits, and ordinary citizens connected to the president through Web-based channels, all of whom might adapt or remix the content to suit their own interests and purposes.[2] Though this entails the president's team relinquishing some control, surrogates and supporters, energized by their ownership over the process, could carry the altered framing of Obamacare much further in a fragmented media landscape than the president alone. Yet the involvement of the president is still central: Supporters would be unlikely to circulate Obamacare without the president's endorsement, given the term's history.

In sum, the Obamacare case demonstrates the influence, though limited, of the president's digital communications strategies on frames in popular news outlets, which we would expect to be resistant to adopting presidential narratives generally, and some of which are overtly hostile to this administration. These new opportunities, however, take place in an admittedly unpredictable media environment where the Obama team's messaging also had far-reaching implications for mainstream news norms in ways they had not likely contemplated beforehand.

Inventing Obamacare

Though he did not originate the term Obamacare, which was first coined by a lobbyist in an obscure industry journal, Mitt Romney was the first prominent Republican politician to use the term in a derogatory way, telling an Iowa crowd in May 2007, "The path of Europe is not the way to go. Socialized medicine, Hillary-care, Obama-care, they don't get it" (Reeve, 2011). After Obama's election and the ACA becoming law, the use of Obamacare by conservatives only intensified. In 2011, Republicans used the word hundreds of times on the floor of Congress (Cox, Parlapiano, & White, 2012). In August 2011, President Obama addressed the issue, stating, "I have no problem with people saying Obama cares. I do care. If the other side wants to be the folks that don't care? That's fine with me" (Madison, 2011). This fell well short, however, of a concerted and lasting effort to reframe the term. As evidence of how partisan and contentious the phrase became, in October 2011, some Democrats objected to the use of Obamacare in franked mailings, which are prohibited from being used for partisan purposes (Dumain, 2012). In the

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[2] See Jones (2014) for a discussion of how "spreadability" applies to citizen-made communications parodying politicians that are widely shared on the Internet.

2012 Republican presidential nomination race, Romney's opponents quickly adopted Obamacare in speeches attacking the president. Romney, in turn, was chastised by his rivals for the "Romneycare" health care policy he had supported as governor of Massachusetts, with some using the unwieldy term "Obamneycare" to link Romney to the president.

However, in March 2012, the Obama team launched a primarily Web-based campaign to reframe the term, sending an e-mail from chief Obama campaign strategist David Axelrod to supporters with the subject title, "Hell yeah, I like Obamacare," and promoting a page on the campaign's website where backers could add their name to a list of those publicly stating "I Like Obamacare." The Obama campaign encouraged its Twitter followers to tweet the specific aspects of Obamacare they liked best and sold "I Like Obamacare" T-shirts and bumper stickers. On March 23, the campaign tweeted "Happy birthday to Obamacare," and at a fund-raiser a week earlier, Obama himself stated, "You want to call it Obamacare—that's okay, because I do care. That's why we passed it" (Dwyer, 2012).

If the name was originally employed by opponents to frame the ACA as excessive government involvement in Americans' health care in a frightening, totalitarian way, the president's team sought to shift that understanding to one in which Obama took prideful ownership of the law as part of a compassionate government interested in citizens' well-being. Obama campaign spokeswoman Stephanie Cutter related,

> On Obamacare, Republicans spent hundreds of millions branding Obamacare as a negative, and we believe we can turn that to our advantage. The term is incredibly popular with the president's supporters, who will fight to the end to defend the law after 70 years of work to pass health reform. (Cillizza & Blake, 2012)

A senior 2012 campaign staff member notes the reelection effort was single-mindedly focused on touting the president's accomplishments, particularly the ACA. Obamacare, the staffer asserts, had become "so ubiquitous at that point (used by supporters and opponents alike) that it felt almost ridiculous not to use the term—at a certain point you have to accept reality." The campaign

> wanted to own the term by embracing it, rather than allowing it to continue to appear as if quasi-verboten . . . prior to the shift, Obamacare was seen almost as a slur . . . but it was also the commonly accepted word for the law. So there was no good way even for supporters to talk about it except by seeming to slur it. So we believed that giving our supporters permission, as it were, to use the term and use it lovingly, would eliminate a lot of the awkwardness around the broader political dynamics of the law. (anonymous campaign staffer, personal communication, December 17, 2014)

Many supporters indeed went on to embrace Obamacare as a positive term, making it their own.[3]

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[3] See examples here, as originally featured on the 2012 campaign's website: (http://www.journalism.org/2012/08/15/engagement-citizens/).

The reframing of Obamacare, as the senior staffer relayed, "was first and foremost an effort to make supporters feel good about the law so that they would spread the word, etc., or at a minimum not think of it as The Accomplishment Which Shall Not Be Named" (anonymous campaign staffer, personal communication, December 17, 2014). How effective, then, were backers at spreading the word, recasting the tenor of Obamacare in mainstream media outlets reaching larger, more diverse audiences than the campaign's e-mail list and Twitter feed?

Research Design

I analyzed news coverage containing the word Obamacare three months before and after March 23, 2012, to determine whether the efforts of the president and his surrogates had any impact on how the term was used. These six months were a pivotal period for the president to build legitimacy for and frame this key legislative accomplishment of his first term. The ACA was a major issue in the 2012 presidential election, the Supreme Court heard oral arguments regarding its constitutionality, and a high-profile debate erupted over whether religious organizations were required to pay for birth control coverage.

Following the bifurcated comparative content analysis, I assess the prevalence of Obamacare in four years' worth of transcripts of the three Sunday-morning news programs on the major broadcast television networks between 2010 and 2014. This allows us to see whether Obamacare has become more or less prevalent in the U.S. political lexicon, and to identify who is using it in coverage over a longer period of time. If the term has become more common, and increasingly used by ostensibly objective sources, the import of the president's effort to reframe the term is greater.

I selected four media outlets for analysis: *The New York Times*, *The New York Post*, CNN, and Fox News.[4] They encompass traditional print and 24-hour news network outlets, liberal- and conservative-leaning identities, and hard and soft news.[5] We can therefore assess the impact, if any, of a primarily online presidential communications strategy on news coverage that reaches a large segment of the public, including outlets catering to the president's political opposition.

This study counts every instance that the word Obamacare was written or spoken in the analyzed coverage, who was using the term, and whether (in the immediate sentence or paragraph that the term was being used) the ACA as a policy was depicted in positive, negative, or neutral terms.[6] I sought to

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[4] All articles and transcripts came from a LexisNexis search for news containing "Obamacare" from December 23, 2011, to March 22, 2012, and from March 23, 2012, to June 23, 2012, encompassing 143 *New York Times* and 65 *New York Post* articles and 339 CNN and 362 Fox News transcripts.

[5] See Boydstun (2013) and Lee (2014) on how *The Times* also plays an agenda-setting role for the rest of the press and is generally representative of a wide array of other outlets. The Pew Research Journalism Project identified cable TV as the leading source of news in the 2012 campaign (http://www.journalism.org/2012/10/25/social-media-doubles-remains-limited).

[6] Because this last element involved a subjective judgment of how the policy was portrayed, I used a trained independent coder unfamiliar with the propositions of the work to replicate the content analysis for the print outlets. For *The New York Times*, intercoder percentage agreement for the first time period was

determine, first, whether Obamacare was a phrase typically associated with negative depictions of the ACA, as it had originated, and, second, whether that shifted in a more positive or neutral direction after the Obama administration and reelection campaign sought to reframe the term. I also classify the speaker/writer of Obamacare, because citizens are likely to be discerning regarding which elite sources they identify as credible, based on partisanship and preexisting political beliefs (Druckman, 2001; Rowling, Sheets, & Jones, 2013; Zaller, 1992). Additionally, this allows us to determine whether the reframing effort affected the words chosen by supporters and journalists to describe the law.

For the print outlets, I also assessed how the term was visually presented. Was it used as a seemingly neutral name for the policy, as though this was the law's actual title, without any indication it might come with particular connotations? Was it placed within quotation marks, indicating this was not the official name? Did Obamacare appear in the coverage as a result of directly quoting someone? For cable news, I assessed whether the individual using Obamacare communicated in some way that this was not a neutral term, such as saying, "what they dubbed Obamacare" or "critics call it Obamacare." These distinctions are important, because if, for instance, journalists used Obamacare as an ostensibly objective replacement for the ACA, then they adopted the rhetoric of the opposition in talking about the policy to their audience. This also relates to the importance of analyzing two time periods. After Obama stated it was "okay" to call the law Obamacare, would this cause some journalists who had previously avoided the term to presume it was now in line with standards of fair coverage?

Below, the results of the print news analysis for the first time period, prior to the Obama administration's embrace of Obamacare, are presented in Tables 1 through 4.

December 2011 to March 2012: Differences in Usage, But Similarities in Negativity

Table 1. Obamacare in **The New York Times***, December 23, 2011 to March 22, 2012.*

Used by	Number of times used (% of whole)	Objective/ neutral use of term	Placed in quotation marks or context given	Within a quote	Within a quote and quotation marks used
Journalist	13 (15.7%)	0	13	0	0
Editorial/op-ed writer	25 (30.1%)	13	12	0	0
Republican politician	37 (44.6%)	0	1	33	3
Commentator/ activist	6 (7.2%)	0	1	2	3
Citizen	2 (2.4%)	0	2	0	0
Overall	83	13 (15.7%)	29 (34.9%)	35 (42.2%)	6 (7.2%)

91.6% and Cohen's κ = .8117, and for the second time period 94% agreement and κ = .8716. For *The New York Post*, the first time period percentage agreement was 95.2% and κ = .8495, and in the second, 91.4% agreement and κ = .8501. These results indicate strong intercoder reliability.

Table 2. Obamacare and Policy Depictions in The New York Times,
December 23, 2011 to March 22, 2012.

Used by	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Journalist	0	12	1
Editorial/op-ed writer	4	3	18
Republican politician	0	36	1
Commentator/activist	0	4	2
Citizen	0	0	2
Overall	4 (4.8%)	55 (66.3%)	24 (28.9%)

Table 3. Obamacare in The New York Post,
December 23, 2011 to March 22, 2012.

Used by	Number of times used (% of whole)	Objective/ neutral use of term	Placed in quotation marks or context given	Within a quote	Within a quote and quotation marks used
Journalist	24 (57.1%)	24	0	0	0
Editorial/op-ed writer	8 (19%)	8	0	0	0
Republican politician	4 (9.5%)	0	0	4	0
Citizen	6 (14.3%)	0	0	6	0
Overall	42	32 (76.2%)	0 (0%)	10 (23.8%)	0 (0%)

Table 4. Obamacare and Policy Depictions in The New York Post,
December 23, 2011 to March 22, 2012.

Used by	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Journalist	1	21	2
Editorial/op-ed writer	0	5	3
Republican politician	0	3	1
Citizen	0	5	1
Overall	1 (2.4%)	34 (81%)	7 (16.7%)

The major difference between *The Times*, a "prestige press" outlet, and the *Post*, a tabloid newspaper, is clearly illustrated by Republican politicians being the most frequent users of the term Obamacare in the former and journalists most likely to use it in the latter. Three-fourths of Obamacare appearances in the *Post* presented the term as though it were merely the name of the policy, with no indication of its pejorative origins. By contrast, the vast majority of times that Obamacare appeared in the *Times* it was placed in quotation marks, appeared within a quote, or both. This last circumstance could be

found in examples such as the following, in an article quoting Mitt Romney: "We should be able to choose the insurance company of our choice. We should not have to have one foisted upon us by the president and 'Obamacare'"' (Shear, 2012). The *Times* had no consistent editorial policy on this, however; in some instances quotation marks within a quote were used, and at other times they were not.

Yet the coverage including Obamacare in this initial period is also a story of similarity across the papers—a large majority of appearances of the phrase accompanied negative sentiments about the policy. This demonstrates how effectively Republican presidential candidates expressed their disdain for the ACA during the height of the primary season. Additionally, the results show that the editorially conservative *Post* allowed the language of the law's opponents to dominate even its more objective news coverage. Potentially, it was the *Post*'s soft news/tabloid style that made the informal Obamacare a more attractive way of describing the policy, but this does not diminish the name's connection to the president's detractors. Table 5 and Table 6 present the results for the cable news networks in this initial period of analysis.

Table 5. Obamacare and Policy Depictions on CNN,
December 23, 2011 to March 22, 2012.

Used by (number of times)	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Indication not an objective term
Republican politician (195)	0	185	10	2
Republican surrogate (24)	0	24	0	0
Journalist (24)	0	16	8	15
Pundit/contributor/host (56)	7	27	22	7
Citizen (6)	0	4	2	0
Other (10)	0	6	4	0
Totals: 315	7 (2.2%)	262 (83.2%)	46 (14.6%)	24 (7.6%)

Table 6. Obamacare and Policy Depictions on Fox News Network,
December 23, 2011 to March 22, 2012.

Used by (number of times)	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Indication not an objective term
Republican politician (93)	1	88	4	1
Republican surrogate (3)	0	3	0	0
Journalist (13)	0	8	5	0
Pundit/contributor/host (160)	1	108	51	2
Democratic politician (2)	1	0	1	1
Citizen (1)	0	1	0	0
Other (9)	0	7	2	0
Totals: 281	3 (1.1%)	215 (76.5%)	63 (22.4%)	4 (1.4%)

CNN's coverage involving Obamacare mirrored that of the *Times* in that Republican politicians were responsible for most of its appearances. CNN's penchant for broadcasting interviews and lengthy portions of Republican presidential candidates' speeches meant that Michele Bachmann, Newt Gingrich, Rick Santorum, and Mitt Romney had plenty of opportunities to relay how they planned to repeal Obamacare as president. On Fox News, commentators and hosts were most likely to use Obamacare, reflecting the substantial presence of analysis and opinion in the 24-hour news network format.[7]

When Obamacare appeared on cable news, it was also usually in the context of framing the policy negatively. However, it was even more rare on both networks than in print for the term to be used in conjunction with a favorable assessment of the policy. In one instance of such negativity, on February 10, Fox News host Eric Bolling told his audience, "You know how I feel about President Obama's socialist agenda. He shredded the Constitution with Obamacare" (Bolling, 2012).

It was also unusual for those using Obamacare on cable to indicate it was not an objective name for the policy, though even more infrequent on Fox News than CNN. This makes sense given the most common speakers of the word were Republican politicians and pundits/program hosts, who would not feel compelled to provide such context, and who were most likely openly and unequivocally condemning the policy it referred to. However, some journalists also freely used the term without qualifiers. Fox News anchor Chris Wallace stated on February 12,

> I think it's fair to say this is precisely why so many people . . . are opposed to Obamacare, because they are concerned with the idea that the government can mandate what people have to do, what private businesses have to do, what even religious institutions have to do. (Wallace, 2012a)

The prevalence of Obamacare and its negative associations in this first time period help explain the Obama team's incentive to embark on its reframing project.

March to June 2012: Less Negative, More Objective?

In this second time period, as seen in the complete results in Tables 7 through 10, Democrats made a few appearances in the news using the term, indicating supporters were now spreading the revised framing of Obamacare. One marker of the reframing campaign's effectiveness is that appearances of Obamacare in which the policy was discussed in a positive light more than doubled as a percentage of overall occurrences in both papers. Still, this represented only about 20% of the times the phrase appeared. In the *Times*, negative portrayals of Obamacare continued to dominate. In the *Post*, interestingly, neutral depictions surged, a major shift from the three months prior. Negative portrayals were still a plurality, however, and sometimes jarring: The *Post*'s March 28 "Letters to the Editor" section was entitled, "Beware ObamaCare: It Might've Killed Cheney."

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[7] Some differences between outlets here may be attributable to what programs each outlet makes available to LexisNexis. Still, in reviewing hundreds of transcripts over the two time periods, these results should provide some indication of the general scope and bent of the coverage.

Table 7. Obamacare in The New York Times,
March 23, 2012 to June 23, 2012.

Used by	Number of times used (% of whole)	Objective/ neutral use of term	Placed in quotation marks or context given	Within a quote	Within a quote and quotation marks used
Journalist	17 (11.4%)	0	17	0	0
Editorial/op-ed writer	37 (24.8%)	29	8	0	0
Republican politician	59 (39.6%)	2	1	53	3
Commentator/ activist	25 (16.8%)	2	1	21	1
Democratic politician/ surrogate	7 (4.7%)	0	2	5	0
Citizen	4 (2.7%)	0	0	4	0
Overall	149	33 (22.1%)	29 (19.5%)	83 (55.7%)	4 (2.7%)

Table 8. Obamacare and Policy Depictions in The New York Times,
March 23, 2012 to June 23, 2012.

Used by	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Journalist	4	6	7
Editorial/op-ed writer	4	21	12
Republican politician	0	53	6
Commentator/activist	1	19	5
Democratic politician/surrogate	6	0	1
Citizen	2	2	0
Overall	17 (11.4%)	101 (67.8%)	31 (20.8%)

Table 9. Obamacare in The New York Post,
March 23, 2012 to June 23, 2012.

Used by	Number of times used (% of whole)	Objective/neutral use of term	Placed in quotation marks or context given	Within a quote	Within a quote and quotation marks used
Journalist	39 (55.7%)	38	1	0	0
Editorial/op-ed writer	19 (27.1%)	16	1	2	0
Republican politician	4 (5.7%)	0	0	4	0
Democratic politician/surrogate	1 (1.4%)	0	0	0	1
Citizen	7 (10%)	6	1	0	0
Overall	70	60 (85.7%)	3 (4.3%)	6 (8.6%)	1 (1.4%)

Table 10. Obamacare and Policy Depictions in The New York Post,
March 23, 2012, to June 23, 2012.

Used by	Positive	Negative	Neutral
Journalist	4	13	22
Editorial/op-ed writer	1	11	7
Republican politician	0	4	0
Democratic politician/surrogate	1	0	0
Citizen	0	5	2
Overall	6 (8.6%)	33 (47.1%)	31 (44.3%)

Compared to December through March, the percentage of the time that Obamacare was presented as a seemingly objective term increased in both newspapers. This suggests that by embracing the term, the president and his surrogates inadvertently also gave news outlets a license to use the term as an objective one as opposed to partisan, subjective rhetoric. Table 11 and Table 12 present the second time period analysis results for the 24-hour news networks.

Table 11. Obamacare and Policy Depictions on CNN,
March 23, 2012 to June 23, 2012.

Used by (number of times)	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Indication not an objective term
Republican politician (115)	0	107	8	0
Republican surrogate (17)	0	14	3	0
Democratic politician/surrogate (5)	4	0	1	2
Journalist (71)	5	22	44	34
Pundit/contributor/host (96)	10	41	45	5
Citizen (9)	4	1	4	0
Other (26)	2	10	14	2
Totals: 339	25 (7.4%)	195 (57.5%)	119 (35.1%)	43 (12.7%)

Table 12. Obamacare and Policy Depictions on Fox News,
March 23, 2012, to June 23, 2012.

Used by (number of times)	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Indication not an objective term
Republican politician (85)	0	79	6	1
Republican surrogate (11)	0	11	0	0
Democratic politician/surrogate (8)	8	0	0	1
Journalist (50)	2	20	28	3
Pundit/contributor/host (268)	10	126	132	1
Citizen (21)	3	8	10	0
Other (54)	0	41	13	2
Totals: 497	23 (4.6%)	285 (57.3%)	189 (38%)	8 (1.6%)

In the second time period, administration officials made their first appearances on cable news using the term. Senior White House political strategist David Plouffe, for instance, said on CNN,

> I think by the end of this decade, if this law is fully implemented, we're going to be very glad they called it Obamacare, because the reality of what is happening here is so different than what the opponents claim. You're going to see more people covered, you're going to see savings in the health care system, you're going to see free preventive care for people, you're going to see women treated equally in the health care system. (Plouffe, 2012)

CNN's journalists also covered the effort to recast the term, while recognizing Obamacare had previously been the rhetoric of the opposition. Correspondent Jessica Yellin told Wolf Blitzer the Obama campaign had "been doing the messaging on this with a new effort to reframe Obamacare as a positive with these t-shirts that say 'Obama cares,' etc." (Yellin, 2012). Anchor Carol Costello previewed an upcoming news segment by saying, "Obamacare isn't a dirty word anymore. Just ask the Obama campaign" (Costello, 2012b). Costello, interestingly, began to use Obamacare as an objective description of the policy in March after the president embraced the term, while previously she had always indicated that it was not a neutral term. For instance, on January 26, she stated on-air, "Romney suggests funding a larger military by defunding what he calls Obamacare" (Costello, 2012a), but on March 27 reported, "Today, the court will look at significant questions about the power of government. Can Obamacare really force most Americans to buy health insurance?" (Costello, 2012c). Overall, however, CNN's coverage was more likely in the second time period than in the first period to indicate Obamacare was not a neutral term. The effort to reframe Obamacare drew attention to the fact that the president had not, up until that point, controlled its meaning. This might have caused many at CNN who were committed to balanced coverage to be more transparent in describing the term's origins.

On both networks, Obamacare was linked to negative depictions of the policy a majority of the time, but this was a smaller overall percentage than in the previous time period. The increase in positive depictions of the policy alongside Obamacare was apparent, as in print. In one instance, Chris Wallace asked a guest,

> And let me ask you about the problems Republicans have, because there's a lot of Obamacare that people like. They like the idea that people can't be excluded from coverage because of . . . preexisting conditions, or that kids can stay on their parent's policy until they are 26. (Wallace, 2012b)

Although CNN's coverage more frequently alluded to Obamacare as not being an objective term than it had in the previous three months, there was little to no change in this regard on Fox News. Several Fox News journalists did not shy away from calling the policy Obamacare, often in a negative context: Wallace on March 23 asked his guest, "Do you agree with the premise that the country, two years later, has not rallied around Obamacare?" (Wallace, 2012c). Fox News also covered the administration's attempted reappropriation of Obamacare, though usually in terms the administration would likely not prefer. Following the president's "okay" of the term, Dana Perino, cohost of *The Five*, sarcastically remarked, "72 percent of the people polled in the CBS/'New York Times' poll today said they don't want the president's healthcare bill, which thankfully we can now call Obamacare" (Perino, 2012, para. 56).

The ACA Over Time: Increasingly Known as Obamacare
Table 13. Obamacare on the Sunday News Shows, March 23, 2010, to March 23, 2014.

Used by (number of times)	Percent of overall coverage	ABC's *This Week*	CBS's *Face the Nation*	NBC's *Meet the Press*	Indication not an objective term
Republican politician (449)	37.4%	133	141	175	1
Republican surrogate (10)	0.8%	8	0	2	0
Journalist (337)	28%	100	55	182	23
Pundit/ contributor (316)	26.3%	157	66	93	3
Democratic politician (62)	5.2%	14	20	28	4
Democratic surrogate (11)	0.9%	3	0	8	2
Other (17)	1.4%	10	1	6	0
Totals: 1,202	100%	425 (35.4%)	283 (23.5%)	494 (41.1%)	33 (2.7%)

To give a broader sense of Obamacare use over time, I analyzed four years of transcripts of the three Sunday-morning news programs on the major broadcast television networks: *This Week* on ABC, *Face the Nation* on CBS, and *Meet the Press* on NBC, with the complete results listed in Table 13.[8] As shown in Figure 1, the term's prevalence increased as the 2012 campaign heated up and then reached new highs as major provisions of the policy were implemented in 2013 into 2014. Republican politicians were the main speakers of Obamacare on the Sunday news shows over the initial three years following the ACA's passage. Democratic politicians never used the term on the programs without a qualifier indicating it was not a neutral term for the policy until after the Obama team's aforementioned March 2012 media blitz.[9] The digitally based "I Like Obamacare" campaign thus altered coverage by giving Democrats the green light to make use of the term in the news.

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[8] This time period encompasses four years from the ACA's passage into law on March 23, 2010.

[9] Rep. Luis Gutierrez (D-IL) was the only Democrat to use the term on the three programs prior to Plouffe's appearances, but he did it in the context of stating about Republicans, "They want to call it Obamacare." By contrast, after Plouffe's appearance, numerous prominent Democratic politicians including Maryland Gov. Martin O'Malley, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-IL), Newark's mayor Cory Booker, and Sen. Harry Reid (D-NV) all used Obamacare on the Sunday talk shows without such qualifying remarks.
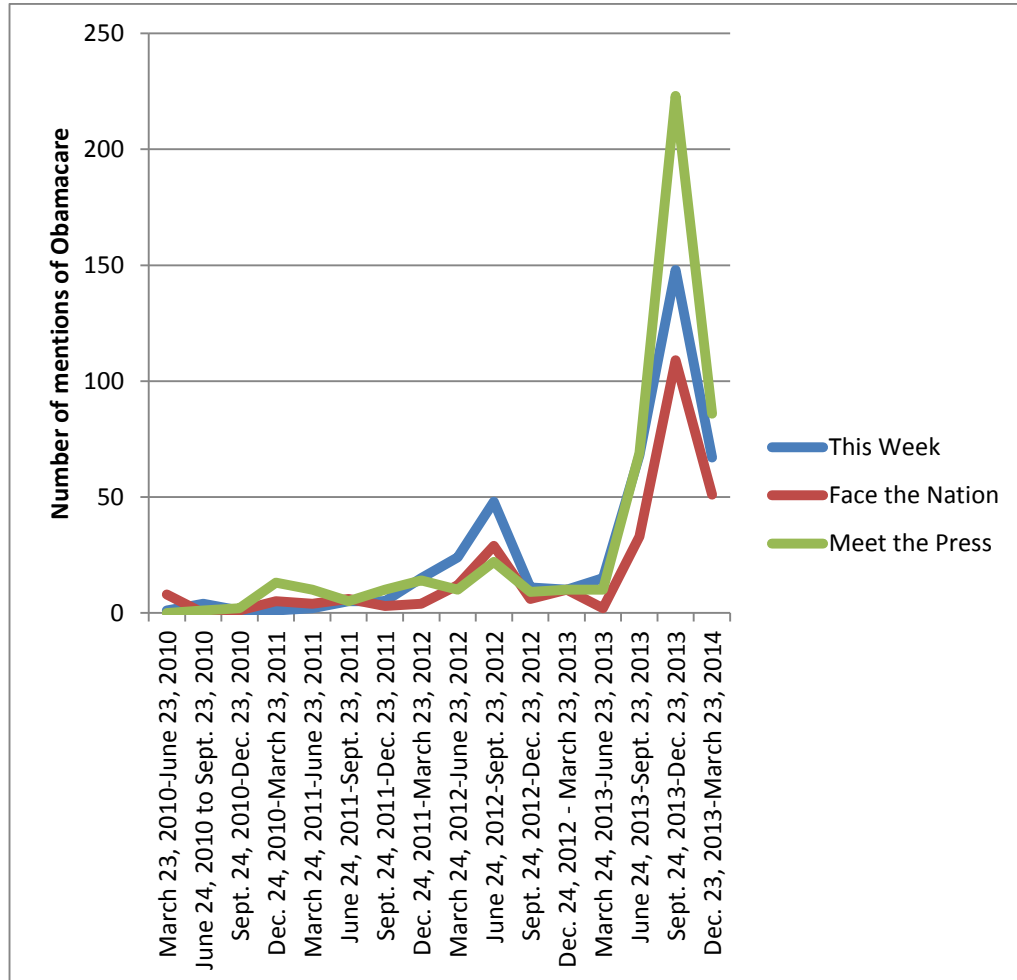
Figure 1: Obamacare on Sunday news programs, March 23, 2010, to March 23, 2014.

Even prior to the "I Like Obamacare" campaign, some journalists on the Sunday shows such as *Face the Nation*'s Norah O'Donnell and *This Week*'s George Stephanopoulos used Obamacare as a synonym for the ACA. By contrast, David Gregory of *Meet the Press* and Bob Schieffer of *Face the Nation* used the moniker as a seemingly objective name for the law for the first time on February 24, 2013, and March 17, 2013, respectively. As seen in Figure 2, in the final year of analysis, journalists became the most common users of Obamacare on the Sunday programs, surpassing Republican politicians. In a marked change from earlier years, hosts now regularly use the moniker Obamacare when posing questions to guests about the health reform policy, indicating that the administration's embrace of the word changed their behavior. On the July 7, 2013 edition of *Face the Nation*, correspondent Major Garrett made such considerations explicit, noting in using Obamacare that "the president uses and embraces that

terminology, no longer pejorative." Recently, the Associated Press, National Public Radio, and *The Los Angeles Times* have all publicly asserted that, although they caution against overuse of Obamacare, the president's use of the term is one reason why journalists may appropriately employ it.[10]
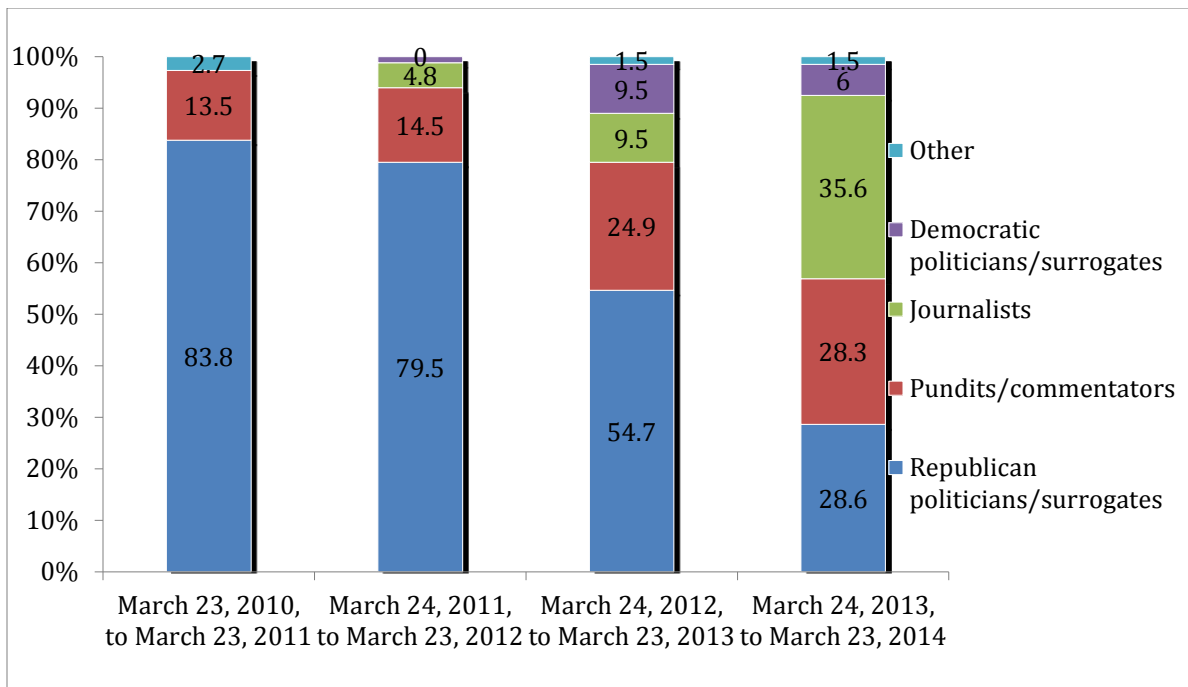

Figure 2. Obamacare users over time.

**Conclusion: Substantial Framing Challenges
Require Substantial Presidential Resources**

The immense number of negative depictions of health care reform that accompanied Obamacare in the analyzed outlets speaks to the effectiveness of the president's opponents at symbolically defining one of his key accomplishments. Journalists' use of Obamacare, often with no indication of its negative origins, raises questions about their commitment to fair presentations of issues to their audiences. That more reporters and news organizations identified Obamacare as an acceptable term after the White House

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[10] See, for instance, http://blog.ap.org/2013/10/01/what-to-call-it-obamacare-affordable-care-act-new-health-care-law/; http://www.npr.org/blogs/ombudsman/2013/09/06/219765368/what-we-hear-when-npr-refers-to-obamacare? utm_medium=Email&utm_source=DailyDigest&utm_campaign=20131001; and http://mije.org/richardprince/ap-npr-curb-use-obamacare-term#Affordable.

sought to reappropriate it speaks to the tremendous impact the presidency has on affecting editorial standards of objective journalism, even with a short-lived, digitally centered communications campaign.

As the effort to reframe Obamacare was followed by a modest increase in positive news content across all four media outlets and (except in the *Times*) a substantial increase in neutral content, it stands to reason that a more sustained campaign might have yielded greater success for the president. The evidence suggests that, even given the challenge of recasting a high-profile derogatory term as a positive one, the president and his surrogates and supporters were able to gain media attention and help shift sentiments about the policy in a less negative direction when Obamacare appeared in the news. The case illustrates the porous nature of today's complex media landscape, as a reframing campaign carried out primarily via the Web affected print and cable news coverage. The president's involvement in this communication strategy was essential, bringing significant attention to his surprising, subversive use of the term. But changing the conversation around Obamacare in the news relied on supporters to spread that message in a variety of venues, reflecting the vast array of ways we encounter information in the 21st century. Were the president, his team, and Democratic Party–affiliated commentators to use the term more frequently, more Obamacare appearances in the news might have been linked to favorable policy depictions.

Limited data are available about the impact on public opinion of calling the ACA Obamacare— some surveys suggest the public becomes more opinionated when the law is referred to as Obamacare as opposed to health reform law in the question, with larger percentages of Americans expressing both favorable and unfavorable views. Democrats express the largest change in favorability, with 73% in favor of Obamacare versus 58% in favor of the health reform law (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2013). Democratic sources' positive use of the term in the news and the presence of Obama's name likely help favorably frame the name for Democratic-leaning citizens. As for the broader public, 46% oppose Obamacare, compared to 37% who oppose the ACA, reflecting continued polarization depending on what the law is called (Liesman, 2013). Further, Americans express greater familiarity with Obamacare compared to the ACA, as 30% of the public reports they do not know enough about the ACA to judge it, in comparison to just 12% who said the same about Obamacare, indicating the importance for the administration of reclaiming the term.

Future research might evaluate precisely what impressions Obamacare evokes in the minds of citizens, and whether these are static or changeable. Potentially, Obamacare has become so ubiquitous in U.S. politics that it has ceased to contain many of the detrimental connotations tied to its invention. The escalating use of the term between 2010 and 2014, and the increasing comfort of journalists and Democrats in employing it, suggest that Obamacare has spread as a way of talking about the ACA. Given the amount of negative coverage of health care reform found in this analysis, however, the news media's use of the term is often connected to the law's opponents. Under such conditions, the president and his advisers were motivated to reframe Obamacare, and their limited success suggests that more time, effort, and resources should be put toward this purpose. Absent a more sustained communications effort, the Obama team problematically gave media figures the freedom to use Obamacare without continuing to associate it with the positive aspects of the health care policy.

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